Understanding reading motivation across different text types

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Understanding reading motivation across different text types: Qualitative insights from children

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Background: Primary school children engage in a wide range of reading activities, yet we lack insights into why children choose to read different text types. Furthermore, recent studies of reading motivation have been dominated by quantitative research; however, qualitative research is necessary to ensure that children's voices are represented when we study their motivations to read.
Methods: Thirty-three children (aged 9–11) from a single school in Scotland participated in individual interviews that focused on understanding their breadth of reading activities and why they chose to read different text types. Interviews were transcribed in full, and a data-driven inductive thematic analysis approach was used to ensure that the full complexity of the data was realised.
Results: Children's reading motivation varied considerably across the different text types. For example, children read books to feel happy, relaxed, excited or to become immersed in the story. They also read books to develop their reading skills, because they felt reading was important, or because it was a habit or familiar. On the other hand, children read newspapers to stay informed, comics as they were fun and easy to read, interactive games as they could direct the narrative and audio books when they were tired. Overall, children reported a wide and diverse range of reading motivations, these being closely linked to the different text types they read.

Conclusions: This study provides new insights into why children choose to read different text types and provides a strong foundation for further qualitative research aimed at gaining a detailed and comprehensive account of children's motivation for reading.

Keywords: reading motivation, theory, books, text types, qualitative

Highlights

What is already known about this topic

- Children's reading motivation is multidimensional, that is, children choose to read for different reasons.
- Children's reading motivation predicts their choice of reading activities.

What this paper adds

- This paper provides essential qualitative insights to understand why children choose to read a range of different text types
- A novel methodological approach that involves training children as researchers is also presented.

Implications for theory, policy or practice

- Theoretical frameworks of reading motivation should be revised to reflect more recent qualitative research, to ensure that children's voices are represented.
- It is beneficial for teachers to understand what and why children choose to read; these insights may help teachers to motivate more reluctant readers in their classroom.

Reading motivation is multidimensional and reflects 'the drive to read resulting from an individual's beliefs about, attitudes toward, and goals for reading' (Conradi, Jang, & McKenna, 2014, p. 154). The scientific study of reading motivation has developed considerably over the last two decades, with large-scale quantitative research studies dominating the field (Conradi et al., 2014). The most commonly used theoretical framework to study children's motivation to read (i.e., reasons or drivers for reading) draws upon self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and differentiates between intrinsic reading motivation (i.e., internal drivers, e.g., reading due to a desire to learn or become immersed in a story) and extrinsic reading motivation (i.e., external drivers, e.g., reading to please teacher/parents or gain a reward) (Conradi et al., 2014; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Quantitative research studies have consistently demonstrated positive associations between intrinsic reading motivation, reading frequency/strategies and reading skill, while extrinsic reading motivation is often unrelated or inversely related with reading frequency and skill (e.g., Becker, McElvany, & Kortenbruck, 2010; Hebbecker, Förster, & Souvignier, 2019;

Schaffner, Schiefele, & Ulferts, 2013; Schiefele et al., 2012; Troyer, Kim, Hale, Wantchekon, & Armstrong, 2019; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

An extensive programme of quantitative research across different countries and contexts (e.g., United Kingdom: McGeown, Osborne, Warhurst, Norgate, & Duncan, 2015; Germany: Schiefele, Stutz, & Schaffner, 2016; United States: Troyer et al., 2019; China: Lau, 2019) has drawn upon the intrinsic–extrinsic constructs within self-determination theory to study children's reading motivation, often using the Motivation to Read Questionnaire (MRQ, Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), or an adapted version of it. The MRQ uses constructs aligning with intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of reading motivation and has recently been described as one of the most comprehensive measures of reading motivation (Schiefele & Löweke, 2018), distinguishing between 11 dimensions of intrinsic (efficacy, curiosity, involvement, challenge, importance) and extrinsic (recognition, grades, social, competition, compliance, avoidance) motivation. Of course, children choose to read for numerous reasons, both intrinsic and extrinsic (Schiefele & Löweke, 2018) and can be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated at the same time (McGeown, Norgate, & Warhurst, 2012).

In a recent study, researchers called for a change to move away from the variable-centred approach to studying reading motivation (i.e., intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation) to a more person-centred approach (i.e., understanding individual reading motivation profiles) (Schiefele & Löweke, 2018). A shift in focus would allow a more nuanced and complex understanding of the motivational profiles of students; however, it would still be limited if it continued to draw solely upon predefined reading motivation constructs originally identified in the 1990s, which were based on student interviews, classroom observations (Guthrie et al., 1996) and review of motivation theory at that time (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Indeed, the theoretical framework and corresponding reading motivation questionnaire (MRQ) that developed as a result of this research have been incredibly influential over the last two decades, contributing significantly to the body of reading motivation research that currently exists (Conradi et al., 2014; Schiefele et al., 2012). However, to what extent it captures the full diversity of children's motivations to read is unclear. Developing a comprehensive account of the constructs underpinning reading motivation and creating appropriate quantitative measures to examine these constructs is crucial if the scientific study of reading motivation is to progress optimally.

Furthermore, while not necessarily specified within reading motivation questionnaires, there is an inherent assumption that reading reflects book reading. However, children's reading habits are much more diverse (Clark, 2019) and children choose to read different text types for different reasons (McGeown et al., 2015). It is therefore crucial to understand what motivates children to read a range of text types, to reflect the diverse reading activities that children engage in. This qualitative research study therefore sought to understand what motivates children to read print books, in addition to other text types.

Method

The study involved training primary school students (hereafter named student researchers) to interview their peers about what they read and why. All student researchers received a full day of research training at the University of Edinburgh. During their research training, student researchers learnt about the project and its aims, received guidance on ethics,

interview techniques and had an opportunity to be interviewed and practice interviewing using a predefined interview schedule.

Participants

Participants in this study were 33 children: 12 student researchers (50% female) and 21 of their peers (48% female) aged 9–11 (final 2 years of primary school) from a single city centre school in Scotland. The primary school has a school roll of approximately 200 students (across 7 school years) and describes itself as 'multicultural'. Although information about the ethnic background of students participating was not collected, the majority (approximately 70%) were White British and over 90% had English as their first language. Using recent school data (2017/2018), 79% of pupils reached the expected level in reading at the end of primary school. A primary school teacher in this school was asked to select student researchers who were representative of their peer group and to include both engaged and disengaged readers. These student researchers then chose one or two of their peers to interview for the project. The final sample reflected approximately 55% of all children in the final 2years of this primary school.

Data collection

Twelve interviews were conducted by two adult researchers (authors 2 and 3), who interviewed the student researchers (aged 9–11) using a set of interview questions designed for the study. These included asking students what type of texts they read out of school, why, and how these texts make them feel. Once students spoke about one text type (e.g., books), they were asked if they read any other text types and if so, why. This continued until children had shared the full diversity of their reading experiences. After being interviewed by an adult researcher, the student researchers interviewed one or two of their chosen peers, resulting in a further 21 interviews. All student researcher interviews were overseen by an adult researcher. Therefore, in total, 33 interviews were conducted, and all were audio recorded.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed in full by members of the research team (authors 2, 3 and 4) and shared among the team. Themes were identified using a data-driven inductive thematic analysis approach, using the six phases of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). To do this, the research team read through the interview transcripts several times (Phase 1), either in a group (authors 2, 3 and 4) or individually (authors 1 and 5). During this process, initial codes were created (Phase 2), which generally consisted of a brief summary of the interview transcript (e.g., re-reads favourite books, mentions favourite author/series, reads for information, gets facts from books). Aligning with the data-driven inductive approach, at this stage, the researchers generated empirical codes that were not based on existing reading motivation theory. Indeed, authors 2, 3 and 4 were unfamiliar with existing reading motivation theory. Once all transcripts were initially coded, the research team met to collate all codes and identify broader themes within the data (Phase 3) where there was overlap among initial codes (e.g., 're-reads favourite books' and 'mentions favourite author/series' were subsumed under the theme

'familiarity'; 'reads for information' and 'gets facts from books' were subsumed under the theme 'learn'). Approximately 3 weeks later, the research team met again to review and refine the themes to ensure that there were clear and meaningful distinctions between each of the themes identified and that they accurately represented the data (Phase 4). Following this, the themes were defined and named (Phase 5). At this stage, author 1 considered these themes in relation to existing reading motivation theory. Given the desire to provide a comprehensive account of reading motivation among these primary school children, all themes defined and named were included in this manuscript (Phase 6) to ensure that the full complexity of the data was realised. However, we acknowledge that some themes are broader (i.e., include more initial codes) or more prevalent (i.e., mentioned by more children) than others. We have used conventions to convey prevalence in this paper as much as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, it should be noted that interviews conducted by the researchers and student researchers were transcribed and analysed separately initially (Phases 1–3); however, themes emerging during Phase 3 were the same across both data sets, and therefore, the data were integrated for Phases 4–6.

Results and discussion

Children's motivations to read books

In terms of what motivates children to read, a range of *feelings and emotions* were shared by the majority of students (31/33) as drivers for reading. For example, many of the students (14/33) spontaneously reported reading to feel calm and relax: 'I can drain all my emotions out on the book, so if I've had a hard day, I can just read'; 'After a long day at school … it just makes me want to read a book'. Furthermore, children (12/33) also said that they read to feel entertained and happy: 'Happy? I just enjoy it'; 'And it makes me laugh sometimes'; 'If I read a funny book, it just lightens my mood'. Many children also reported reading to feel excited (10/33): 'You don't want to put it down, because every page you read, there's another cliff-hanger'; 'Oh, what will happen here, what will happen here? Oh, can I just read for two more minutes?'

In addition to reading to fulfil these different emotional experiences, the most prevalent theme that emerged was reading for feelings of immersion and escapism (20/33): 'It's quite nice to sort of feel like you're sort of letting go from whatever is happening around you, and you can go deep – by yourself – deep in the world of the book'; 'I feel like … if it's written very well, I feel like I'm there'; 'I feel like I am actually in that place, and I don't want to leave it'. Of course, this theme most likely relates specifically to fiction books and different genres of fiction will offer the reader different things, as said by one student: 'I kind of feel what the book wants me to feel'.

Furthermore, another common theme (12/33) emerging from the data was familiarity – children re-read their favourite books, read to complete a series, to read other work by their favourite authors or to spend more time with their favourite characters: 'I prefer series, because if it's one book, there's always a part of the end that you want to know what happens next, and in series you can almost go on forever'; 'Because I've read the whole series three times, and I'm thinking about reading it a fourth time, I enjoyed it that much'.

Less prevalent responses, yet mentioned by some were the perceived educational benefits of reading. For example, some (6/33) said that they read to learn: '… it gives me information'; 'in some books, it's fiction but they put facts into it and you can read

the story while also being interested by the facts and things'. Others read to challenge themselves (5/33): 'Because some of them are challenging, and I like to challenge myself' or to develop their reading skills (5/33): 'I feel like chapter books have a lot more words, and they're quite, like, devel- developing my reading skills'.

Others mentioned different aspects of their lives and how these influenced their decisions to read. For example, some (4/33) said they read because it was social: 'I go to Reading Club as well, so – that's really fun, 'cause all your friends are there as well' or because it was a habit or part of their routine (4/33): 'when I'm going on trips, I like reading in the car'; 'after reading I can go to sleep, which is nice, because it's like, reading yourself a story, a bedtime story'.

Finally, some students (7/33) spoke of extrinsic factors that influenced their motivation to read, such as reading to comply with a request: 'Um, because … Miss [Teacher] wants us to read', to gain a separable outcome or reward: 'I read half an hour every day – I try at least 'cause I don't get to watch Netflix if I don't' or to fill time if they were unable to do their preferred activity: 'I read because it kinda just gives me.. a little bit of something to do if I'm not allowed on iPad'. Finally, two students reported that they read because it was important, yet it was unclear to what extent this had been internalised and therefore may still be regarded as an extrinsic motivator: 'I think reading is quite important. … It's just like part of life that everyone has to go through, even if they like books or not'.

Indeed, children's spontaneous accounts of why they choose to read books align with theories of reading motivation, more specifically, research that differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Yet, in this study, a different range of motivators were identified: relax, entertain, excite, immersion, escapism, familiarity, learn, challenge, develop skill, social, routine, compliance, reward, time filler, and important. While some of these are less conceptually distinct than others (e.g., immersion/escapism and challenge/develop skill are similar), they are still important in their own right. As stated earlier, while the MRQ (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) has been used widely and is regarded as one of the most comprehensive measures of reading motivation (Schiefele & Löweke, 2018), identifying 11 distinct dimensions (efficacy, curiosity, involvement, challenge, importance, recognition, grades, social, competition, compliance and avoidance), it clearly does not encapsulate the full range of reasons of why children read (e.g., unmentioned are some from this study: relax, entertain, excite and familiarity). Quantitative research exploring reading motivation has, over the last decade or so, increased considerably (Conradi et al., 2014); however, there are so few examples of qualitative studies (e.g., only 3.3% of reading motivation studies from 2003–2013 were qualitative; Conradi et al., 2014). We need to return to more qualitative research studies, to fully understand children's reading motivation and to develop new and more comprehensive theoretical frameworks. Understanding the predictive power of reading motivation on reading outcomes (e.g., reading engagement, skill, development) is crucial, yet we fail to do this properly if our measures of reading motivation are not optimal.

Children's motivations to read other text types

While all students typically shared their motivations for reading paper books initially, when prompted to discuss other texts types and their reasons for reading these texts, a diverse range of texts and motivations were shared. For example, students spontaneously mentioned reading magazines (15/33) to learn (3/15); 'a lot of the time [magazines are]

often non-fiction, so you're kind of reading for, like, National Geographic. … geography', to support their interests (3/15): 'I just try to read football magazines, or football stuff' or, more commonly, when they were bored (4/15):'Um, sometimes when I'm bored or waiting, like, in a waiting room somewhere, there's like a magazine, and I just sort of pick it up and read through it …'. On the other hand, children's motivations for reading magazines when they were younger were very different, for example, the toys or activities (3/15): '… often when I was younger, like, the Lego Star Wars, would come with a toy, so that was the main reason I would buy it'; 'I don't really like reading magazines that are more … that have activities on them, any more. For some reason, I grew out of them'. Indeed, as children shared their reasons for reading different text types, it was evident that what they read, and why, evolved. This was not solely the case for magazine reading but for different genres of books too. For example, as shared by one student: 'When I re-read books that I used to read when I was little, and I'm like, oh my gosh, how did I like that joke! Like, you know … Where do apes make their toast? On the gorilla. That's not funny anymore. You read it the first time, and it was hilarious …'.

On the other hand, students (15/33) spontaneously mentioned reading newspapers, mostly to stay informed (5/15): 'It make me feel like I know what's happening in the world' or, similar to magazines, when they were bored and newspapers were accessible (6/15): 'Sometimes if I'm on the bus and there's nothing to do, I might read a bit of the newspaper'. Finally, children's motivations to read comics (14/33) were more numerous, for example, comics were short texts (4/14): 'cause when I wasn't too enjoying reading, it's a shorter text, and there's pictures' and were seen by some as more exciting or interesting than books (3/14): 'the same as [books] but more sort of, "POW POW POW"'. Comics were also seen as fun reading (5/14): '[ ] is a bunch of really funny comics' and something they could share easily (2/14): 'I like to laugh, and I like to share them with others'. Indeed, some (3/14) spoke of family connections and that they read comics because their family had too: 'I found it was quite cool how my dad and my grandparents also read it, and I was reading the same thing, and it's just, how it's changed'. However, similar to magazines and newspapers, comics were sometimes read when they were bored (2/14): 'Comics, sometimes like uhmm, if I just want something to do … I'm just bored'.

In addition to comics, magazines and newspapers, children also spoke about reading on Kindle (5/33) and were more likely to choose to do so when going on holidays (2/5): 'I have a Kindle because we often go on holidays' or to be environmentally friendly (2/5): 'I felt it was kinda helping the ecosystem, as in like not chopping down trees for paper'. Two also said they were reading when playing interactive text-based games, the benefits of this being that they could direct the narrative: 'it's based in a reading book, a book that you can play through … It was very interactive cause you can choose anything you do'. Furthermore, some (4/33) students spontaneously mentioned listening to audio books, recognising this as a reading activity. Audio books were good if you were tired (2/4): 'sometimes when I'm a bit too tired to read, it's nice to listen to somebody else reading to you', when the subject matter/text is challenging (2/4): 'I've got Harry Potter ones, and the Harry Potter books are really thick, and I'm not ready for really thick books, so it's nice to listen to it, instead of not reading it for, like, years, probably' and were also good to listen to with others (1/4): 'my little sister listens to [my audiobook] as well, and it's – yeah, I like it'. Furthermore, one child said that they still read picture books when they were tired or wanted an easy read: 'but the next chapter was really, really long, and

you know, it was nearly, you know, quite late. And I was just like aw, I can't be bothered reading all this, this is tiny print. So I just picked up a picture book and read that'.

McGeown et al. (2015) reported that children's reading motivation drives their reading choices, that is, children motivated to read out of a curiosity to learn were more likely to report reading nonfiction, those who read to become immersed in books reported reading more fiction, while those motivated to achieve good grades were more likely to read school books. The qualitative insights from this study align with this quantitative research, illustrating that children's reading motivations drive their reading choices. Yet this study develops current understanding further, as it explains why children may choose to read a broader range of text types. Furthermore, it is not restricted to a predefined set of motivational constructs inherent within quantitative studies, thus allowing for a more complex and nuanced understanding of children's reading motivation.

In terms of theoretical implications, there have been excellent reviews recently to develop consensus on what reading motivation is (Conradi et al., 2014; Schiefele et al., 2012); however, these have drawn upon previous, primarily quantitative research studies in order to do this (e.g., Conradi et al., 2014 noted that 88% of studies during the previous decade were quantitative). While we recognise the limited scope of this study (i.e., research conducted in a single school), we encourage other reading motivation researchers to conduct solely qualitative research across other contexts to explore similarities and differences in children's motivation for reading. Indeed, there are good examples of other qualitative work with children (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006) and adolescents (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008), both in the United States, on this issue. Drawing together qualitative research across different demographic and cultural contexts, and studying developmental changes in reading motivation, is necessary to push the field forward and develop a new theoretical framework of reading motivation that reflects current reading activities.

Educational implications

Understanding what and why children choose to read and the depth and range of experiences children can have when reading is crucial for teachers to create a reading culture and environment that supports all children. This research highlights the diverse experiences that children within the same class may have when reading. When considered alongside quantitative research highlighting the importance of intrinsic reading motivation for reading frequency, engagement and skill, it provides examples of a vast array of intrinsic motivators that teachers could capitalise on (e.g., enjoyment, relaxation, excitement, learn, etc.) to encourage more children to read.

While it is important for teachers to have a good knowledge of children's reading interests and children's literature in general (e.g., Cremin, Mottram, Bearne, & Goodwin, 2008), it is also beneficial for teachers to learn more about children's motivations for reading, to fully understand what may prompt or encourage children to read. Indeed, inspiring and sustaining high levels of intrinsic reading motivation among primary school aged children is beneficial for children's reading activity/frequency, engagement and skill (Hebbecker et al., 2019; Miyamoto, Pfost, & Artelt, 2019). Literacy instruction within initial teacher education and teacher training therefore should ensure that there is sufficient focus to developing teachers' understanding of children's motivation to read, in addition to recognising the reciprocal relationship that exists between reading motivation and reading skill (Hebbecker et al., 2019).

From this study, it was also evident that children's motivations to read change over time, illustrated most clearly when children shared why they chose to read magazines. Large-scale research studies in the United Kingdom (Clark, 2019) demonstrate clear changes in the reading habits of children and young people (aged 8–18). Indeed, as children's reading habits evolve, there are also likely to be shifts in their motivations for reading (e.g., see Altun, 2019 and Moje et al., 2008 for qualitative research with young readers and adolescents, respectively). Ensuring that teachers understand changes in students' reading motivation over time is crucial if they are to foster greater motivation and engagement among their students and respond appropriately when working with different age groups. Similarly, school librarians also need to ensure that they understand the reading motivations of different age groups (in addition to variation within year groups) to be able to respond to different needs.

Limitations and future research directions

First, we recognise that data were collected by 14 researchers (two adult researchers and 12 primary school student researchers); however, we were surprised to find no differences in content in the data collected by the adult and student researchers, both in terms of the text types discussed and the motivational themes that emerged. This may be because all researchers used the same set of interview questions, although there was scope within the interviews for researchers to ask additional questions. Drawing on our experience from this research approach, we would suggest that providing student researchers with more autonomy over their interview questions would lead to a more student-led approach to the exploration of this topic. While the content of the interviews led by adults and students did not differ, there were often differences in the nature of the interviews, for example, the student-led interviews were often more playful. Based on this study, we would encourage academic researchers to consider training students to join their research team, if the methods used and research focus is appropriate. This approach builds investigative skills and confidence in young people, raises their awareness of university activities and may inspire them to consider research careers.

Second, this study was carried out in a single school; therefore, it is unlikely that these findings provide a comprehensive account of children's motivations to read at this age. Nevertheless, even with this small sample, a broader range of motivational constructs were identified than are typically studied in quantitative research studies. We would argue that more qualitative research is needed, across a large number of demographically different schools, to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework to fully understand children's reading motivation for books, in addition to other text types. Furthermore, future research would benefit from information about children's reading skills and their home and school environment (including access to different text types, encouragement to read different texts) to understand to what extent these factors influence their motivations to read.

Third, we have used a broad interpretation of Conradi et al.'s (2014) recent definition of reading motivation to provide the most comprehensive understanding of why children read different text types that our data would allow. However, what counts as reading motivation (see Schiefele et al., 2012 for a discussion) is clearly an important issue for researchers to resolve for research in this area to continue. Both Conradi et al. (2014) and Schiefele et al. (2012) recognise the lack of qualitative research to inform this discussion.

Finally, these research findings are restricted to students aged 9–11, and therefore, more research exploring reading motivation across a broader age range and broader range of text types is important. Indeed, most reading motivation research focuses on students aged 9–14 (Conradi et al., 2014). Understanding what motivates younger children as they learn to read is crucial (e.g., Altun, 2019), as is more research with adolescents (e.g., Moje et al., 2008), who typically report the lowest levels of reading engagement (Clark, 2019), yet often participate in a wider range of reading activities than their younger counterparts.

Conclusion

This study highlights different dimensions of reading motivation than are currently used in quantitative studies on this topic. It also highlights the need for more qualitative research to develop a new theoretical framework to study children's reading motivation. Investing time in this way could ultimately advance the scientific study of reading motivation by helping researchers to fully understand the predictive power of reading motivation and support teachers to understand how to harness motivation to support reading engagement and attainment.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this study (i.e., interviews often led by child researchers interviewing their peers), it is not possible to share the interview transcripts from this project. Furthermore, we did not seek or receive consent from the child researchers to share this data. In future, consent will be sought to ensure interview transcripts can be shared in full.

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